



Roxton Never Hesitated for an Instant.

to meet the dark tangle of our hedge or the solemn and cavernous gloom of the great trees which arched above our heads. And yet the feeling grew ever stronger in my own mind that something observant and something malevolent was at our very elbow. I thought of the Indian superstition of the Curupira, the dreadful spirit of the woods, and could have imagined that his terrible presence haunted those who had invaded his most remote and sacred retreat.

THAT night (our third in Maple White Land) we had an experience which left a fearful impression upon our minds, and made us thankful that Lord Roxton had worked so hard on making our retreat impregnable. We were all sleeping round our dying fire, when we were aroused—or rather, I should say, shot—out of our slumbers by a succession of the most frightful cries and screams to which I have ever listened. I know no sound to which I could compare this amazing tumult, which seemed to come from some spot within a few hundred yards of our camp. It was as ear splitting as any whistle of a railway engine; but, whereas the whistle is a clear, mechanical, sharp-edged sound, this was far deeper in volume and vibrant with the uttermost strain of agony and horror. We clapped our hands to our ears to shut out that nerve-shaking appeal. A cold sweat broke out over my body, and my heart turned sick at the misery of it. All the woes of tortured life, all its stupendous indictment of high heaven, its innumerable sorrows, seemed to be centered and condensed into that one dreadful, agonized cry. And then, under this high-pitched, ringing sound there was another, more intermittent,—a low, deep-chested laugh, a growling gurgle of merriment, which formed a grotesque accompaniment to the shriek with which it was blended. For three or four minutes on end the fearsome duet continued, while all the foliage rustled with the rising of startled birds. Then it shut off as suddenly as it began.

For a long time we sat in horrified silence. Then Lord Roxton threw a bundle of twigs upon the fire, and their red glare lit up the intent faces of my companions, and flickered over the great boughs above our heads.

"What was it?" I whispered.

"We shall know in the morning," said Lord Roxton. "It was close to us—not farther than the glade."

"We have been privileged to overhear a prehistoric tragedy, the sort of drama which occurred among the equiseta upon the border of some Jurassic lagoon, when the greater dragon pinned the lesser among the slime," said Challenger, with more solemnity than I had ever heard in his voice. "It was surely well for man that he came late in the order of creation. There were powers abroad in

earlier days which no courage and no mechanism of his could have met. What could his sling, his throwing stick, or his arrow avail him against such forces as have been loose tonight? Even with a modern rifle it would be all odds on the monster."

"I think I should back my little friend," said Lord Roxton, caressing his express. "But the beast would have a good sporting chance."

Summerlee raised his hand. "Hush!" he cried. "Surely I hear something!"

FROM the utter silence there emerged a deep, regular pat-pat. It was the tread of some animal, the rhythm of soft but heavy puds placed cautiously upon the ground. It stole slowly round the camp, and then halted near our gateway. There was a low, sibilant rise and fall, the breathing of the creature. Only our feeble hedge separated us from this horror of the night. Each of us had seized his rifle, and Lord Roxton had pulled out a small bush to make an embrasure in the hedge.

"By George!" he whispered. "I think I can see it!"

I stooped and peered over his shoulder through the gap. Yes, I could see it, too. In the deep shadow of the tree there was a deeper shadow yet, black, inchoate, vague, a crouching form full of savage vigor and menace. It was no higher than a horse; but the dim outline suggested vast bulk and strength. That hissing pant, as regular and full-volumed as the exhaust of an engine, spoke of a monstrous organism. Once, as it moved, I thought I saw the glint of two terrible greenish eyes. There was an uneasy rustling, as if it were crawling slowly forward.

"I believe it is going to spring!" said I, cocking my rifle.

"Don't fire! Don't fire!" whispered Lord Roxton. "The crash of a gun in this silent night would be heard for miles. Keep it as a last card."

"If it gets over the hedge we're done!" said Summerlee, and his voice cracked into a nervous laugh as he spoke.

"No, it must not get over," cried Lord Roxton; "but hold your fire to the last. Perhaps I can make something of the fellow. I'll chance it, anyhow."

It was as brave an act as ever I saw a man do. He stooped to the fire, picked up a blazing branch, and slipped in an instant through a sally port which he had made in our gateway. The thing moved forward with a dreadful snarl. Lord Roxton never hesitated; but, running toward it with a quick, light step, he dashed the flaming wood into the brute's face. For one moment I had a vision of a horrible mask like a giant toad's, of a warty, leprous skin, and of a loose mouth all beslobbered with fresh blood. The next, there was a crash in the underwood and our dreadful visitor was gone.

"I thought he wouldn't face the fire," said Lord Roxton, laughing, as he came back and threw his branch among the fagots.

"You should not have taken such a risk!" we all cried.

"There was nothin' else to be done. If he had got among us, we should have shot each other in tryin' to down him. On the other hand, if we had fired through the hedge and wounded him, he would soon have been on the top of us—to say nothin' of giving ourselves away. On the whole, I think that we are jolly well out of it. What was he, then?"

Our learned men looked at each other with some hesitation.

"Personally, I am unable to classify the creature with any certainty," said Summerlee, lighting his pipe from the fire.

"In refusing to commit yourself, you are but showing a proper scientific reserve," said Challenger, with massive condescension. "I am not myself prepared to go further than to say in general terms that we have almost certainly been in contact tonight with some form of carnivorous dinosaur. I have already expressed my anticipation that something of the sort might exist upon this plateau."

"We have to bear in mind," remarked Summerlee, "that there are many prehistoric forms which have never come down to us. It would be rash to suppose that we can give a name to all that we are likely to meet."

"Exactly. A rough classification may be all that we can attempt. Tomorrow some further evidence may help us to an identification. Meantime we can only renew our interrupted slumbers."

"But not without a sentinel," said Lord Roxton, with de-

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